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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000523

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [PINR](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: GVN STEPS UP DIVIDE AND CONQUER ATTACKS ON UBCV

REF: A) HCMC 407; B) HCMC 266; C) HCMC 261

1. (SBU) Summary: Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security-affiliated newspaper covered prominently its Vice Minister's April 30 meeting with Thich Huyen Quang, the ailing 90-year old Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), as a gesture of GVN goodwill and reconciliation. The article portrayed the Patriarch as a moderate Buddhist leader, but slammed UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do as a dangerous anti-GVN renegade impeding the unification of the Buddhist church. Our contacts in the UBCV confirm that police have been asking repeatedly about the Patriarch's will and succession plans. The GVN apparently fears that Thich Quang Do, younger, healthier, based in HCMC and far more politically assertive, poses a far greater threat should he inherit the leadership of the UBCV as is expected. End Summary.

2.(U) On May 5, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) mouthpiece "Cong An" newspaper ran a front page story on the April 30 meeting between MPS Vice Minister Nguyen Van Huong and UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang at his pagoda in Binh Dinh Province. The article called the meeting "friendly and open-hearted." It reported that the influential MPS Vice Minister highlighted previous efforts by the GVN to work with Quang and the UBCV, including Quang's meeting with former Prime Minister Phan Van Khai in April 2003 in Hanoi. Huong said that reports of Quang being under surveillance or pagoda arrest for the past 20 years are "incorrect." He "strongly affirmed" to Quang that he can travel anywhere he wants and noted the March 2007 visit of the Consul General (Ref A) and his ability to travel to HCMC for medial treatment in 2006 (Ref B) as evidence of his freedom. According to the Cong An article, Huong invited Quang to attend the upcoming conference of the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) to contribute his ideas towards the "improvement and unification of Vietnamese Buddhism."

13. (U) The article quotes Huong as warning Quang to cease associating with UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do, who is "abusing religion to hide his political purposes." Huong cautioned that Do was taking advantage of Quang's prestige to "disturb the people's solidarity." He asserted that Do had faked Quang's last will and testament to ensure that, upon Quang's death, he would be appointed supreme UBCV leader. Huong stated Do drafted the Buddha's birthday message on Quang's behalf with false statements designed to incite anti-GVN sentiments. The article claimed that Quang "was very upset about this." According to the article, Quang closed the meeting by affirming that he does not work against the interests of the Vietnamese people or the VBS and expressed his desire to visit Hanoi and meet with the Prime Minister.

The UBCV: More False GVN Propaganda

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14. (SBU) Post contacted two of Thich Huyen Quang's aides in Binh Dinh Province and a key UBCV leader in HCMC to discuss the MPS press play. They told us that Quang is aware of the MPS article and was dismissive of its contents.

The three monks confirmed that the meeting with the Vice Minister occurred and that Huong was accompanied by the provincial MPS Director and his deputy. Quang was alone.

15. (SBU) Quang reportedly told his aides that the Vice Minister again sought to discourage him from associating with Thich Quang Do. Quang said that VM Huong told him that he was free to travel so long as he does not meet with Do. One of Quang's aides noted that the Vice Minister inquired about the Patriarch's will -- something that police now do often -- but Quang replied that it is an internal UBCV matter. One aide was present at the conclusion of the meeting and overheard the Vice Minister warn Quang that "Thich Quang Do is holding hands with the Americans," to which Quang replied, "so too is the GVN I understand."

16. (SBU) On May 11, the Paris-based International Buddhist Information Bureau, the UBCV's international representative, released Thich Huyen Quang's "Buddha Day" message. We confirmed with an aide of Thich Huyen Quang that the message is authentic and was transmitted to Paris from Binh Dinh a few days before the meeting with Vice Minister Huong. The message is critical of the GVN and touches on some of the most neuralgic issues for the Communist Party, including Vietnam's border demarcation deal with China. The message notes that:

-- "the UBCV is suffering some of the worst repression in over 20 years. I am forbidden to travel to receive medical care. The Most Venerable Thich Quang Do is prohibited to visit me in Binh Dinh. In 20 provinces all over the country, members of UBCV Representative Boards are coerced and repressed."

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-- "imposing monasteries have been built, and costly ceremonies organized, but all this cannot hide the fact that the beliefs of religious followers are not respected in Vietnam."

-- "spiritual integrity is no different from territorial integrity. If we take the land that our forefathers so painstakingly built, and give it away to foreign powers, what is left of our people's nation and homeland? In the same way, the human spirit must not cower or surrender to illegitimate and immoral forces."

Comment

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17. (SBU) If the Vice Minister's approach to Thich Huyen Quang was to try and drive a wedge in the UBCV hierarchy or to pitch -- again -- for Quang to lead the UBCV into the VBS, he failed. Quang's strident Buddha Day message makes it clear that, although he is more frail and soft-spoken than Thich Quang Do, their views are the same. Quang, 90, is in poor health. The GVN is concerned that Thich Quang Do will inherit the leadership of the UBCV. Though 80, Do is strong and relatively healthy, based in HCMC, and more politically assertive. The reality on the ground for UBCV provincial leaders continues to be difficult. For example, the authorities continue to summon members of various provincial boards of the UBCV -- particularly in the Mekong Delta and in Hue and Khanh Hoa provinces in Central Vietnam -- to "working sessions with the police," and demand that they drop their UBCV affiliation or face arrest.

End Comment.

WINNICK